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**Testimony before the United States House of Representatives**  
**Subcommittee on Economic Development, Public Buildings and Emergency**  
**Management**  
**Regarding**  
**FEMA's Urban Search and Rescue Program in Haiti: How to Apply Lessons**  
**Learned at Home**

**Steven R. Cover**  
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**and Federal Emergency Management Agency Urban Search & Rescue Program**  
**Eastern Region Sponsoring Agency Chief's Representative**  
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Thank you, Chairwoman Holmes Norton, Vice-Chair Perriello, Ranking Member Diaz-Balart, and distinguished Committee Members. It is my pleasure and honor to appear before the U.S. House of Representatives Subcommittee on Economic Development, Public Buildings and Emergency Management today.

As an introduction, I am Steve Cover, a 33 year member of the Virginia Beach, Virginia, Fire Department. I currently serve as the Fire Chief and Emergency Manager for the City of Virginia Beach, and as such, I am the Sponsoring Agency Chief for Virginia Task Force 2, one of the 28 Urban Search and Rescue (US&R) Teams in the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Urban Search and Rescue National Response System. I have been asked to serve the FEMA Urban Search and Rescue Program as one of three Sponsoring Agency Chief Representatives, representing the nine Eastern Region Teams.

I have served in various capacities within the Urban Search and Rescue Program since its inception - from a Rescue Squad Leader to a Task Force Leader, operationally and from a Task Force Leaders Representative to a Sponsoring Agency Chiefs Representative on the program management side. I have deployed to incidents, including the Oklahoma City Bombing, the 9/11 attack on the Pentagon, the 2002 Winter Olympics, and Hurricanes Opal, Frances and Ivan, to name a few. I have been in the Sponsoring Agency Chief's role for Virginia Task Force 2's deployments to several hurricanes and the recent deployment to Haiti.

I am speaking to you today as a Sponsoring Agency Chief, and as such, I want you to know how proud I am of this program. The men and women who serve our nation through the US&R Program are committed and competent professionals who care deeply for both the program and the citizens they serve. Every team member is a professional provider in his or her locale, whether a firefighter or a medical doctor or a trained search dog handler. These personnel respond to national disasters with the same skill sets that they apply every day in their hometowns. The concept is fairly simple: utilization of an all hazards approach to incident mitigation utilizing special training, special equipment and special people.

The US&R system is part of a tiered approach to managing disasters. It has the capability to augment local and state resources with federally sponsored teams that can readily plug into operations at the local level following the National Incident Management System. These US&R Teams, made up of local providers who are on their local payrolls until activated, are far less expensive to maintain than a resource that may otherwise be fully funded by the federal government. The 28 US&R Teams and their localities benefit from the training, equipment and experience that comes from being part of the program. Just as the system members apply the skills learned at home to national disasters, they apply the lessons learned while on federal missions in their local jurisdictions. The same search and rescue methods that were utilized and refined during the 9/11, Hurricane Katrina and Haiti responses are performed throughout America daily by our members. Many of the planning methods learned by my Team members

in this system were applied this past weekend while dealing with a winter storm in Virginia Beach.

The recent Haiti response, just as FEMA US&R deployments in the past, once again proved the value of the program to the people impacted by the disaster. The four FEMA US&R Teams - Florida Task Force 1, Florida Task Force 2, New York Task Force 1, and Virginia Task Force 2, along with the two Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance Teams, USA-1 and USA-2, which are also members of the US&R System as Virginia Task Force 1 and California Task Force 2, performed some 47 live rescues while in Haiti. Many of the international teams did not have the heavy breaking and breaching capabilities that our teams did. This, coupled with a rapid deployment of the teams, made a difference.

Our training, equipment and processes worked and lives were saved as a result. The deployed teams knew each other and operated from a common operating platform grounded in training, similar equipment and common policies. Several of the remaining 28 US&R teams were on standby at their points of departure, waiting to deploy as augmentation or in relief of the first teams that were deployed. The US&R Program Office also worked diligently to coordinate the deployment of the teams and to ensure the practices applied to a domestic response would also be applied here. As a Sponsoring Agency Chief of one of the deployed teams, it was nice to know that support was there and spelled out in the activation orders.

As with every deployment, there are areas for improvement and we feel confident that after-action issues will be addressed by not only the US&R Teams, but the Program Office as well. I would like to thank Mr. Carwile, Mr. Fenton and the entire US&R Program Staff for their efforts and support. Mr. Carwile has clearly made an effort to make himself and his staff available to the Sponsoring Agency Chief's Representatives and the Task Force Leaders Representatives. This increased spirit of cooperation will go a long way toward making the program even better. I feel that issues identified with the Haiti response, ranging from transportation, re-supply and force protection, will be refined and improved upon. This will ensure our teams are mobilized

and transported to the disaster site within the window of opportunity for successful search and rescue operations, whether in a domestic or foreign theater.

From a Sponsoring Agency Chief's perspective, there are legal and financial liabilities that are of concern. We want to send the best trained teams to assist others while assuring our localities are not exposed. In this economic climate, expenses that have been borne by Sponsoring Agencies in the past are being more closely scrutinized by our localities. Many of the Sponsoring Agencies are facing staffing cuts that have not been seen in 30 years. We are continually being asked to do more with less in our municipalities. It is increasingly more difficult to place a fire company out-of-service for US&R training or equipment maintenance when we do not have enough resources to protect our community to the levels we have had in the past. We feel it is important for this program to have recurring funding in order to support training and exercises, acquisition and maintenance of equipment and medical monitoring for the responders. Workers Compensation and liability protection for our personnel is also very important. God forbid a member of one of our Task Forces is injured or killed while deployed on a mission. We want the proper protections in place for that member and their family. Additionally, we want to ensure our deployed members have proper liability protections in place and their jobs are secure upon their return home.

Establishment of an Advisory Committee, as outlined in House Resolution 3377, would provide input to the Program Office and the Administrator on matters concerning the US&R program. We welcome this opportunity to enhance the program. There are many members within the ranks of the program who could fill this important role and assist in bridging any gaps between FEMA management and the Sponsoring Agencies. The Sponsoring Agencies supply all of the nearly 6,000 members of this national system.

We are willing to explain the value of the US&R Program to our communities for the reasons I have outlined and your support, through House Resolution 3377, will assist in providing the needed funding and legal sufficiency for this worthwhile program. We stand ready to assist in making this proven system better, now and into the future.